

ADRIANO V. ROSSI 'L'Orientale' University, Naples

Colours and Lexical Taxonomies: Linguistic and Cultural Categories in Iranian

1. The interest for colour emerged strangely enough in Iranology before many other disciplines, and disappeared as quickly (apart from a few exceptions, due to the personal interests of some isolated scholar). The simultaneous manifestations of Abraham Jackson¹ and Charles de Harlez² were based on the prevailing concepts that “in the early ages [...] the perception of varieties of color was weak and indistinct, if not often altogether wanting”.³

At the time of the early spread of the evolutionist theory, in fact, it was thought that the chromatic perceptions of the ancient peoples would have been rather limited, and that the modern sense of colour would have developed only through slow evolution.⁴

However, in the last decades of the nineteenth century a series of papers on Latin and Greek was aimed at demonstrating that this was not the way things stood in the Classical antiquity⁵; and in connection with this anti-evolutionist approach E. W. Hopkins published a paper in 1883 on Vedic colours,⁶ in which he endeavoured to demonstrate that peoples of ancient India were quite capable generally to specify chromatic nuances. Harlez' paper only few years later showed how many chromatic lexical subsets fully developed could be found in a quantity of old and modern linguistic cultures, from Manchu to Chinese and from old Greek to Indo-Iranian, and stressed the importance for this aim, in view of their most ancient textual contents, of the *Vedas* and the *Avesta*.⁷

Even if by the 1880s, there was near general agreement that the ancient stages of primitive cultures and languages contained fewer basic colour terms than the present day languages, Hopkins and Harlez openly challenged this assumption. Jackson joined the challengers forcefully with the following remark: “however true the theory of the lack of color-perception might be for the primitive age of man, it certainly does not seem to hold for the period which some of the most ancient literatures represent”.⁸

¹ Cf. Jackson 1890.

² Harlez 1890.

³ Jackson 1890: clxii; Gladstone 1858 and Geiger 1880 may be considered as major cornerstones of these views.

⁴ On evolutionism and colour terms cf. André 1949: 14-15 (with literature); Berlin-Kay 1969: 134-151.

⁵ The first major criticism to the views of Gladstone and Geiger came from Allen 1879.

⁶ Hopkins 1883.

⁷ Harlez 1890: 247: “Nous ne nous étions d'abord proposé que d'étudier les régions extrêmes du continent asiatique parce que nous y trouvions moyen de remonter à l'origine d'une civilisation et à des temps antehistoriques même. Mais il ne sera pas moins utile de jeter un coup d'œil sur d'autres régions dont les monuments littéraires atteignent et dépassent même de beaucoup l'âge de l'Iliade et de ses parties les plus anciennes. Je veux parler de l'Eran avec son Avesta et de l'Inde en ses Védas”.

⁸ Jackson 1890: clxiii.

This is the standpoint from which one should understand his treatment of “the most distinct primary colors” as summarised in Table no. 1; it is interesting to remark that our current interpretations diverge (where marked with an asterisk) in minor details and very few major ones⁹:

<i>axšaēna-</i>	‘blue-black’ ¹⁰ *
<i>auruna-</i>	‘—’ (“cf. ‘fiery’ ”) ¹¹ *
<i>auruša-</i>	‘white’
<i>pouruša-</i>	‘grayish’
<i>sāma-</i>	‘black’
<i>spaēta-</i>	‘white’
<i>suxra-</i>	‘red’
<i>zairi-</i>	‘yellow, green, golden’ (“combined idea of —”), <i>zairita-</i> ‘yellowish’ ¹² *

Table 1. List of the primary colours in Avestan as quoted in Jackson 1890; only adjectives which may be used as autonomous lexemes are listed.

Jackson’s now outmoded conclusion is understandable if contrasted with the strong minimalist assumptions prevailing at the time: “while color does not play in the *Avesta* the conspicuous part that it does in later writings, still, from an examination of this literary monument, we do not seem justified in assuming any ignorance or lack of the color-perception in the peoples whose civilization it represents. Color-words are used perhaps rather sparingly; but wherever used they imply distinct and accurate conceptions of color”.

The more innovative findings of Jackson include: (1) there is a “change of signification in the Av. and Skt. words for ‘white’ and ‘red or ruddy’ ”¹³; (2) one should be rather prudent

⁹ Cf. fn. 9, 10, 11 below.

¹⁰ Only found in Avestan with reference to coats of bears and cows. The meaning ‘blue-black’ was attributed to the two isolated Av. occurrences “upon a comparison of the Iranian languages and upon the tradition” (Jackson 1890: clxiv); but it is now clear that the colour of the animal coat is prototypically perceived in connection to the reflection of light from its surface, so both its traditional gloss MPrs. *xašēn* (‘(dark) blue’ MacKenzie 1986: 94, but its mention among the coloured stones in the *Phl. Rivāyat DD* [Williams 1990: 265-268: the position of the “green” stone is suspect] does not permit to identify it with any certainty) and its possible Ir. cognates (Kurd. *hešîn* ‘blue; green’, etc. Chyet 2003: 242-243) may have stabilized only one of the chromatic connotations implied in the OIr. semantics; one should remark the persistence in NPrs. lexicography of ‘white’ connotations for the *xašin* family [if connected at all to Av. *axšaēna-*] otherwise unexplained in Guizzo 1999: 221-232. This explanation seems to be preferable to the ‘grue’-colour (according to Kay’s revised terminology, cf. Kay 1975) interpretation implied in Morgenstierne’s quotation *apud* Chyet 2003: 242 (“The words for ‘black’, ‘blue’, and (dark) ‘green’ are frequently interchangeable in Ir. and Ind. languages”). Notwithstanding Belardi 1961, I consider the word as unetymologised; David Buyaner suggests (in a unpublished paper kindly put at my disposal by the author) a connection with **axš-* and the Evil Eye (prototypically blue in an Iranian context).

¹¹ Jackson 1890: clxiv: “The attribute Av. *auruna* (cf. Skt. *aruṇa*) in Ys. xxxiv.9 (Gāthā), Yt. xiv.23, viii.36, was investigated; and the question of its use as a color-epithet in the *Avesta* (cf. ‘fiery’) was discussed”. Cf. now Kellens–Pirart 1990: 205 Av. *auruna-* ‘rouge, fauve’, cf. Ved. *aruṇá-* (Mayrhofer 1992: 113).

¹² No ‘combined idea’ is acceptable for any Av. passage containing *zairi-*; I have treated all the matter in a contribution to R. E. Emmerick’s Gs. (= Rossi in print).

¹³ “i.e., the Av. words *auruša* ‘white’ and *sukhra* ‘red’ show a complete inversion from the meaning which they have in Sanskrit” (ibid.). Cf. Swennen 1999-2000: 33: “Les emplois sémantiques de véd. *aruṣá-* et av. *auruša-* sont nettement distincts. Tandis que le premier semble surtout dévolu au feu, le seconde a pour utilisation prioritaire la qualification d’étoiles ou d’êtres de nature stellaire”; ibid. 29: “Il est permis de se demander si *auruša-/spaēta-* + *zairi.gaoša-* n’a pas une valeur technique propre au

“against laying too much stress on arguments ‘a silentio’” regarding “the absence of ‘blue’”¹⁴; (3) colour is linguistically expressed not only through primary nouns, but also through their morphemic derivatives which stay with the former in a *chromatic* relation not to be taken for granted.¹⁵

2. After Jackson’s and Harlez’ papers, there was a lull in the Iranological literature concerning colour perception, except for sporadic references to the terminology of colour, mostly scattered in the form of footnotes or short excursus.¹⁶ All this, inspite of the growing mass of scientific literature dedicated to the linguistic treatment in the colour perception of different world cultures.

Bailey and Eilers have been among recent scholars most attracted by the Iranian colour terminology in different ways. Bailey offered a remarkable number of links – often on a basis that one could hardly share – to Indo-Iranian roots and a wide range of derived terms, interpreted as reference to colours¹⁷; to him one also owes the only study on an Iranian ‘chromatic family’ researched as a whole, *The range of the colour zar-*.¹⁸ Bailey’s conclusions about this family, which like many other works by the same author are centred on the Khotanese lexicon, appear as generalized formulations according to which “in Iranian this range was from red through reddish, orange-red, to yellow and green”. I think I have demonstrated elsewhere that when we consider the whole lexical family of Av. *zairi.gaona-* ‘verdant’, Sogd. *zrywn’k* ‘green’, Phl. *zargōn* ‘green’ etc. we are not confronted with different bahuvrīhis originated by some descendent of OIr. **zar-* ‘yellow’ + OIr. **gauna-*, but with a common OIr. inheritance, i.e. **zairigauna-* ‘verdant, fresh, green’.¹⁹ Bailey retains an

vocabulaire appliqué aux couleurs des animaux [...] L’expression ordinaire reposait [...] sur *spaēta-*. Elle n’y substituait *spaēta-* que lorsqu’il s’agissait de se référer à des étoiles, donnant effectivement à ce syntagme le sens suggéré par PANAINO” (Swennen’s doctoral dissertation was kindly put at my disposal by the author).

¹⁴ Ibid. A late evolutionist stance seems implicit in Čunakova’s comment (1994: 199) on the lack of labels for ‘želtyj’, ‘zelenyj’, ‘goluboj’, ‘sinij’ in OIr. sources: “Čto kasaetsja drugix cvetov, to blizkie po spektru cveta – želtyj i zelenyj – drevnimi irancami ne različalis’ i oboznačalis’ odnim imenem prilagatel’nym – av. *Zairina*, goluboj i sinij v avestijskom (i pexlevi) vstrečajutsja liš’ kak proizvodnye ot imen suščestvitel’nyx” (see also recently Čunakova 2004: 250-251), and in Schimmel’s passage (1993: 46): “In earlier times color designations were not as exact as in our own. The area of blue-green was often indeterminate, simply suggesting something dark, whereas the red-yellow hues often formed a single, light category”.

¹⁵ Jackson 1890 passim.

¹⁶ A rather isolated exception is Olga Čunakova’s recent six-page article on *Colour symbolism in Pahlavi*, mentioned at fn. 14 above, to which one should add Schimmel’s article in the *Encyclopædia Iranica* (1993).

¹⁷ Just to give an example, only in Bailey 1985 I counted 11 reconstructed roots which according to the author are linked to Iranian or Indo-Iranian bases bearing on colours (**al-* 1985: 10, **karm-* 1985: 29, 85, 97 fn. 242, **kas-* 1985: 53, 57, **hvar-* 1985: 97 fn. 242, **kap-* 1985: 97 and 144 s.v., 108, **axša-* 1985: 104, **ab-* 1985: 107-108, **saipa-* 1985: 109, **ark-* 1985: 129, **sauk-* 1985: 129, **zar-* 1985: 129). In Bailey 1954 more than twenty Ir. colour labels are treated; in the etymological sections of his *Saka Dictionary* (= Bailey 1979) the mention of Ir. chromatic labels largely exceeds 100.

¹⁸ Bailey 1974.

¹⁹ Cf. Rossi in print. From this point of view, the attribution of a productive morpheme **-gauna-* to dead Ir. languages – as Bailey suggests – is as inexact as the attribution of its descendents to NIr. languages; at Av. stage (when both the autonomous usage of *gaona-* ‘colour’ and its presence in bahuvrīhis containing the same semantic feature are attested) the adjective **zairigauna-* was probably no more analysable.

evolutionary approach according to which if “the range of a colour name (spectrum) in an ancient Indo-European language presents difficulty”, one should point out in the subsequent development of Iranian “early limited lists of colour names [...] gradually made more precise”.²⁰ At the same time, he appears rather confident of the possibility of linking linguistic labels to the perceptive reality even for rather remote antiquities, in consonance with his background as a historical linguist; according to this procedure, the link between the meaning of a certain root and a chromatic perception was established in the language once and for all, and the only task of the modern scholar is to reconstruct it.

A similar approach seems implicit in Ilya Gershevitch’s argument on the colour in his *Soma* controversy (the only autonomous unit containing the word ‘colour’ in Gershevitch’s bibliography as far as I can remember). Let us analyse his wording on the question: “it is clear that, as soma is called *hari* [in Vedic – A. V. R.] and the Avestan haoma is called *zairi.gaona* (lit. *zairi.coloured*), and *hari* and *zari* are etymologically the same word, the Vedic and the Avestan poets were repeating the colour definition, inherited from their common, Indo-Iranian ancestors, of the prehistoric *sauma itself. Therefore, seeing that the meaning of Av. *zairi-gaona* is incontrovertibly “green” or “yellowish green”, if one says that the same colour-word denotes a different colour in Vedic [...] one cuts off either the Avestan or the Vedic from its Indo-Iranian sauma-tradition”.²¹ Again, one wonders if the argument of the inheritance from a common, Indo-Iranian poetical heritage is in itself conclusive, as against the many occurrences in practically all Indo-European languages of labels coming from etymological cognates misunderstood by the subsequent traditions.

Eilers appears much more sceptical on the possibility to reach a chromatic certainty by linguistic reconstruction; in fact he was the first (and only) Iranist very aware both of the motivations of colours as ethnographically observable and of the different perceptive perspectives such as to induce modifications in their chromatic salience, and consequently he was naturally inclined to emphasize remarkable divergences in the semantics of chromatic cognates as documented in modern dialects and languages (both in internal dialect comparison and in the comparison of New with Old and Middle Iranian terminology). As far as I know, Eilers never treated colour terminology as the main subject of any of his essays, but the temptation to come back to this theme was ever-present in his research, and documented in a series of short remarks published on several different occasions from the Thirties to the Seventies.

One should remember that in the same lapse of time different scholars had repeatedly emphasized that many of the words for colour in different world languages synthesize combinations of hue, gloss, glitter, and mottling.²² Van Wijk’s essay²³ – where this result of the research on colour at mid-1950s is summarised – is concerned with the discrepancies in the structure of colour lexicons in the languages of the world, and attempts to show that these differences are based on the relative importance of the brightness versus hue dimensions of colour perception. In van Wijk’s words “peoples living in the higher latitudes

²⁰ Cf. Bailey 1974: 369.

²¹ Gershevitch 1974: 59.

²² The scientific qualities are better described as follows: (1) pigmentation, as the result of variable saturation; (2) prismatic colour, caused by the refraction of white light into its component; (3) iridescence, caused by interference in space lattices; (4) gloss, being the reflection of light from polished surfaces.

²³ Van Wijk 1959.

generally use a color (i.e., a hue) nomenclature, peoples living in the tropics roughly speaking have brightness nomenclatures”²⁴; since then, the effects of the brightness in colour perception and terminology have never more escaped the scholars’ notice.

We have no information concerning Eilers’ knowledge of the latest developments on colour, because he never mentions any general study on this subject in his published papers.²⁵ Nevertheless, I suspect that he was not completely unaware of some of the latest scientific information.

In any case, to Wilhelm Eilers we owe the remark that colours give an impression of oscillation, so that bright colour labels, if considered peculiar to certain surfaces (parts of the human body as the visage and inner organs, waters and liquids, the atmosphere in certain climatic conditions, the animal coats in certain luminosity conditions, greenstuff, fruits etc.), may fluctuate around their chromatic foci and therefore change their hue reference as a whole. They can therefore be used in a conventional way for any of a series of colour labels which can freely alternate (white and white/yellow, red and red/yellow, black and black/blue, etc.). Eilers tried to demonstrate the correctness of this assumption on several occasions, especially in his research published in the 1970s/1980s (*Die vergleichend-semasiologische Methode in der Orientalistik*²⁶; *Sinn und Herkunft der Planetennamen*²⁷; *Geographische Namengebung*²⁸); preliminary formulations of this assumption are likewise current in some of his early 1960s papers, such as his essay on botanical onomasiology²⁹ and his first research on the name of Cyrus.³⁰

A series of further original remarks on colour labels are also due to Eilers’ interest in this field of the Iranian lexicon:

- 1) In our culture – which since millennia entered the Iron Age – most weapons are still produced with a high bronze content; “so ist ar. *ayás-* n., das später eindeutig das „Eisen“

²⁴ Van Wijk 1959: 131. Berlin–Kay 1969: 150 rightly remark that a more refined version of van Wijk’s thesis might characterize tropical systems as “brightness dominated” and temperate systems as “brightness plus hue dominated”.

²⁵ Note e.g. the following remarks, where a particular attention to the mix of perceptions and mineralogical structures is clearly observable: “Eosin, die rote Tinte, schimmert grünlich. Kann ein solcher physikalisch-physiologischer Hintergrund für unser Phänomen bestehen und unserem Verständnis aufhelfen?” (Eilers 1979: 53–54 fn. 4).

²⁶ Eilers 1974: 44–53; in particular p. 51: “Jede Art von Schleim schimmert [...] Wasser und Feuer, die uns als Inbegriff unüberbrückbarer Gegensätze erscheinen, stehen für einen mythischen Sinn als leuchtende „Substanzen“ eng beieinander”.

²⁷ Eilers 1976: 6 fn. 10: “Die Wörter für „glänzen“ und die Farbnamen insbes. „rot“ und „weiß“ treffen sich in allen Sprachen”; p. 84 fn. 227 (“Flüssigkeiten glänzen”), and many quotations in the *Stichwörter Index* (pp. 132–138) s. vv.

²⁸ Eilers 1982: 34 fn. 109: “Altind. *nīla-* „indigofarben, schwarzblau“. Dazu wohl altind. *nīrá-* n. „Wasser“, gehört möglicherweise zur Wurzel *nī-* „glänzen“ (Pokorny 760 sub ²*nei-* „glänzen“, lat. *nitēre*): gemäß der Devise „was feuchtet, das leuchtet“”.

²⁹ Eilers 1962: 69–70 fn. 58; p. 76 fn. 75; p. 78 fn. 82.

³⁰ Eilers 1964: 230 fn. 147: “Bei den Arabern ist zwar *az-zarqā’* „der blaue Himmel“ (also wie lat. *caelum*), aber *zarqūn* selber ein „leuchtendes Rot“! Farbbezeichnungen „schillern“ eben (semit. *wrq* ist “gelb, grün, blau”; turk. *qizil* „rot“ erscheint als „grün“ in einigen iranischen Mundarten!), zumal wenn die Farbbezeichnungen auf Grundbegriffe wie „scheinen, leuchten, glänzen“ zurückgehen (pers. *surx* „rot“ gegen ai. *śuklá-/śukrá-* „glänzend, weiß“ von *keu-k-*; dt. *blank*, frz. *blanc* „weiß“ gegen engl. *black* „schwarz“ zu *blinken*; russ. *krasnyj* „rot“ gegen ksl. *krasъnъ* „schön, weißgekleidet“ zu *krā-s-*)”.

bezeichnet und zwar sowohl bei Indern wie bei Persern, im Veda wie Avesta gewiss überwiegend noch die Bronze”³¹ as “geht mit aller Deutlichkeit aus den beiden Beiwörtern „gelb“ (*zari-*, ai. *hári-*) und „golden“ (*zaranya-* statt des überlieferten *zaranya-*) hervor”³²; “ist goldenes oder gelbes Eisen ein Unding [...] das fühlen auch die Übersetzer, z. B. Gershevitch: “cast in strong, yellow, gilded iron””³³;

2) As applied to water, the colour ‘black’ may refer to its ‘purity/depth’; and this is valid both for rivers (“Im Orient verbindet sich der Begriff »schwarzes Wasser« z. T. mit der Vorstellung einer guten dauernden Quelle; so etwa im Persischen [...] *siyāh’āb* [...] auch »Quelle« schlechthin [...] auch bei den Belutschen [...] *sīyāh’āf* »Dauerquelle«”³⁴) and for seas (“*Ixšīn Rūd* heißt im Mittelalter ein Fluß in Fārs, der Persis, dem wir wegen des alten heute verlorenen Wortes *ixšīn*, neupersisch *xašīn*, kurd. *šīn* d. h. altpers. *a’xšaina-* „nicht leuchtend, dunkelblau“ unser Augenmerk zuwenden. [...] aber würden wir uns für das kleine Flüßchen im Südwesten des Irans gar nicht so interessieren, hätte nicht das gleiche Wort *a’xšaina-* offenbar auch dem Schwarzen Meer seinen damit iranischen Namen gegeben”³⁵);

3) The adjectives for ‘white’ and ‘red’ may overlap in perception when distant lights (e.g. stars³⁶), fires and their metaphorical projections are concerned (“Die Wörter für „glänzen“ und die Farbnamen insbes. „rot“ und „weiß“ treffen sich in allen Sprachen”³⁷);

4) The different colours assigned in cognate dialects to the same tree may oscillate according to the reference to its perceived salient colour³⁸;

³¹ Eilers 1969: 23.

³² Eilers 1969: 22.

³³ Eilers 1969: 24 and fn. 63. Moving from the same assumptions Eilers points out (ibid.) that the “goldmündigen Pfeilen” of Yt 10, 129 (*išu- zarāniiō.zafar-*) “tragen [...] keineswegs einen Mund, d. h. eine Spitze, von Gold, sondern glänzen dort nur wie golden”.

³⁴ Eilers 1964: 221 fn. 126.

³⁵ Eilers 1982: 38; see also: “[...] den mittelalterlichen *Ixšīn*-Fluß in Fars, der die ihm gewaschenen Kleiderstücke grünblau färbte, der also *a’xšaina* »nicht leuchtend«, d. h. blau oder schwarz war wie das Schwarze Meer” (Eilers 1964: 231). Eilers’ explanation for the Black Sea seems preferable to Schmitt’s one (Schmitt 1996: 221-222, based on the symbolic designation of the four (?) cardinal points by colour names), in view of what follows: (1) the persistence in Iranian of cognates of the same colour label as applied to different water surfaces throughout Iran (cf. Eilers quoted above); (2) the confuse framework in which directional systems by colour seem to overlap (cf. Rossi 1996: 94-95 and literature: in China and Central Asia South/red, North/black; in India South yellow, North/red; but there may have been a superimposition of the process outlined by Schmitt over a different denomination pattern); (3) the still unknown focal meaning of the hypothesized **axšaina-* at the time of internationalization of the (perhaps Iranian) denomination of the Black Sea (most probably early Achaemenid times, as assumed by Schmitt 1996); cf. Fleming 1982: 84-86 for more prudence in using Old Persian stone denominations (as against Pagliaro 1955: 162: “L’etimo dato dal Bartholomae [...] e il significato di ‘scuro’ applicato al mare non contraddicono all’uso dello stesso aggettivo per qualificare la turchese. [...] I nomi dell’azzurro e del verde muovono da determinazioni fatte su termini che esprimono poca intensità di luce”).

³⁶ This may be a reasonable explanation for the fact that Sirius “being by no means a red star, but rather it has a blue-white colour” (Panaino 1995: 3), could be described as *auruša-* ‘white’ in Avestan and *aruṣá-* ‘red’ in Sanskrit (also according to Mesopotamian and Egyptian traditions), as discussed at length in Panaino ibid. (but Vedic *aruṣá-* is ‘rötlich, hellrot, glänzend, feuerfarben’ as in Mayrhofer 1992: 113, not simply ‘red’).

³⁷ Eilers 1976: 6 fn. 10.

³⁸ Eilers 1962: 69-79 fn. 58.

5) Iranian denominations of the ‘rainbow’³⁹ referring to ‘red’ and ‘green’ are attested in western and eastern languages⁴⁰; at the same time a particular complementarity between the two colours may be observed in various Iranian languages (“Grün ist die Komplementärfarbe zu Rot”⁴¹).

3.1. During Eilers’ formative phases, as in many other research fields where the disintegration of the Eurocentric views proceeded alongside with the search for universals, also the research on colour terminology had progressively changed its objectives along with the modern research on the languages of non-European cultures as a whole.

In the beginning, the study of extra-European languages did not involve particular modifications to the way of conceiving colour universality, because the surveys were done in a very simplified way moving from the observer’s categories.

A modern approach in the study on colour vision appears only with the experiments carried out in the USA in the 1950s and 1960s with the aim of verifying the hypothesis of linguistic relativism as put forward by Benjamin Whorf (according to which language would affect one’s world view). In those years a paper by Harold Conklin⁴² demonstrated that the colour perception among the Hanunóo, a native population of the Philippines, is wholly peculiar, as it divides the whole chromatic field in four terms, with two opposition couples ‘hell/dark’ and ‘dry/fresh’.

In 1969 a book universally considered as a turning point in this field was published by Brent Berlin and Paul Kay.⁴³ This work relies on an inter-linguistic approach which includes a field-study of 20 languages and a library-based research of 78 other languages. The authors found between 2 and 11 basic⁴⁴ colour categories exist, and from these any given language will use eleven or fewer colour terms even though the human eye can differentiate a multitude of colours (the seven stage evolutionary sequence as it appears in a subsequent updating by Kay and McDaniel is schematically summarised in table no. 2).

³⁹ Eilers 1967: 123-146. The study of the rainbow names has been recently taken again by Daniele Guizzo, who during his doctoral studies at *Orienteale* came to the problem with a new approach mixing the methodologies of his two schools: the symbolic-chromatic interest learned at *Ca’ Foscari University*, Venice and the cognitive and onomasiological dialectology practised by the *Orienteale University*, Naples.

⁴⁰ Eilers 1967: 141 fn. 82: “Auf die bei uns sprichwörtlichen Iris- oder Regenbogenfarbe zielen ausser np. *rangīn kamān* noch folgende Ausdrücke ab: kurd. *keske’sōr* d.i. «dunkelgrün» (*kesk*) + «rot» (*sūr* < *suxra-*, np. *surx*) – lur. *sōz-o-suil* d.i. «grün» + «rot (?)» – afgh. *sra-u-šna* / *šna-u-sra* d.i. «rot» (Fem. v. *sūr*, s. oben) + «grün» (Fem. v. *šin* < *a’xšaina-*), *sra-u-zaryuna* «rot» + «grün» (< mp. *zar’gōn* «goldfarben, grün»).

⁴¹ Eilers 1979: 54 fn. 4. Reference to ‘green’ in connection with Keringāni *āl* was considered as a difficulty by Zoka 1954: 49 (cf. Rossi 2003: 804 ff.); but cf. this line in a Sistani couplet: *dasakeh sūr-e Sābjān gašta xūnī* “Sābjān’s pale little hand has become blood-stained” (with the following comment on *sūr*: “When describing the colour of the skin, means “pale”, opp. of “sabza””, Weryho 1961-1962: 291); and the donkey’s skin commented below.

⁴² Conklin 1955.

⁴³ Berlin–Kay 1969.

⁴⁴ According to Berlin–Kay 1969: 6 major criteria for the identification of a colour as “basic” in a determinate language are: (1) the term is monolexemic (its meaning is not function of the meaning of its parts); (2) its meaning is not included in any other colour term; (3) its application should not be restricted to a narrow class of objects; (4) it must be psychologically salient for informants (“These criteria [...] suffice in nearly all cases to determine the basic color terms in a given language”, *ibid.*).

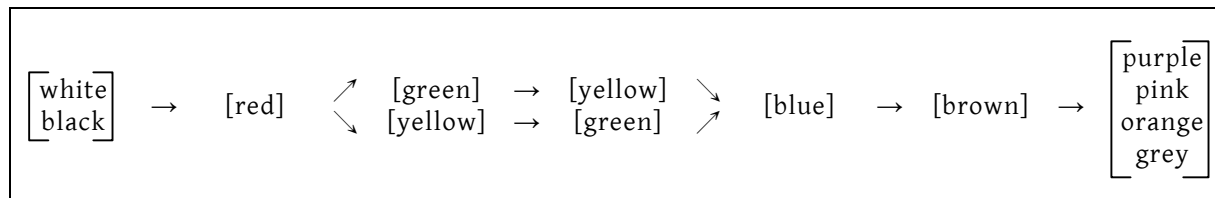


Table 2. After Kay-McDaniel 1978: 615.

The seven stage evolutionary sequence could theoretically accommodate every colour vocabulary from the simplest (Stage I) to the most complex (Stage VII). All languages have terms for white and black. At the first Stage, white and black can be expressed in terms of light and brightness, or moist and dry. Other colours are often expressed in qualifying phrases like ‘fresh leaf’ for ‘green’. The next stage incorporate a term for ‘red’, the brightest colour the human visual system can perceive since it emits the shortest and most intensive wavelength. This attracting quality of red may explain in part the human response to it and its place in the colour linguistic sequence. Languages fall into the subsequent stages when more colour terms are present.

A modification of the Berlin and Kay sequence was offered by Turton in 1980 (see table no. 3):

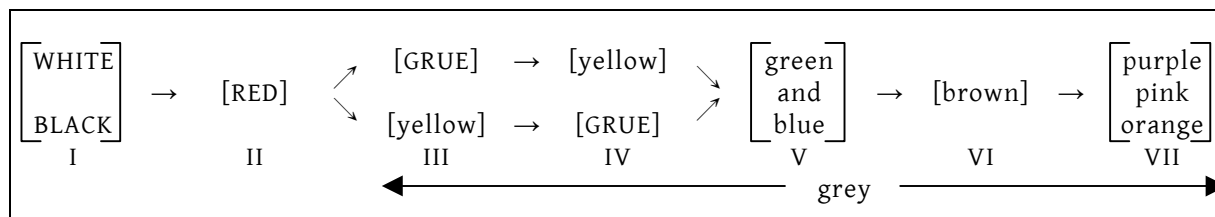


Table 3. After Turton 1980: 331.

In this sequence ‘grue’ is a conventional label used to describe languages of Stage III which have a common term for ‘green/blue’, and the documentary evidence points to many Iranian languages having labels for ‘grue’ (by the way, I suspect that Old Persian is a language at Stage III in terms of the basic colour theory,⁴⁵ but I will discuss this matter on another occasion). I would recall here a significant convergence in the ancient Near-eastern languages: the Ancient Egyptian colour terminology as studied by John Baines,⁴⁶ and the Sumerian and Akkadian ones as studied by Benno Landsberger⁴⁷ agree in possessing four basic colour terms (black, white, red and grue) plus a term for ‘variegated’⁴⁸; but I

⁴⁵ I.e. four colours, with ‘yellow’ and ‘grue’; this would *inter alia* better explain the outcomes of OIr. *axšaina-* and *kapauta-* than usually does the projection of fuzzy colours on the OIr. phases. Čunakova (1994: 198) “třexčlennaja sistema cvetov” (white, black, red) are symmetrical to the three basic colours of Sufi imagery, “although black and white are not hues in the technical sense”, as Schimmel (1993: 46) rightly remarks.

⁴⁶ Cf. Baines 1985.

⁴⁷ Cf. Landsberger 1967.

⁴⁸ ‘variegated’ is a chromatic concept persistently attested throughout the IE documentation (cf. in general on IE colours Sargent 1995: 436–439, and for ‘bigarré’ Gerschel 1966: 630), and also present in the Iranian domain: see e.g. the colour of the Robe of Warriors in *Bundahišn* 140.7 (which I have treated in the Lincei 1994 Conference on *Iran and Central Asia*, cf. Rossi 1996: 96–97), the typical colour of the skin of the neonate connecting Āl with neonatal fevers (Rossi 2003: 807–808), and the animal coats treated by Piemontese 1974: 124–125; cf. also Duchesne-Guillemin 1962: 171–172: “Les Indo-Européens, et à leur suite les Indo-Iraniens, puis les Iraniens, symbolisaient les trois fonctions par le

wonder if this could be sufficient to hypothesize a common (cross-cultural) colour perception in the Ancient Near East.

3.2. Berlin and Kay's seminal theory received consensus and also, especially in the last ten to fifteen years, remarkable dissent, on bases which is impossible to discuss here.

An interesting rebuttal of Berlin and Kay's research appeared around mid-1970s, when a group of more than eighty linguists, psychologists and anthropologists led by Charles E. Osgood published the results⁴⁹ of a survey carried out for more than ten years and involving representatives of 25 European and Asian cultures and languages, including two Iranian languages, Dari and Fârsi; colour perception and its role among the emotions held a position of particular centrality in Osgood's research. Of special interest are the comparisons between the data elicited by Osgood's teams and the data originating from the previous literature on colour, on what Osgood defines *colour connotations* (i.e. adjectival characterisations of colour labels such as 'adventurous, solemn, cowardly', and nominal characterisations which can be readily transformed into adjectives such as 'female, passion, anxiety, disgust' and the like). Immediately apparent is the salience of 'red', which has a total of 1200 weighted associations with emotion words, its nearest competitor being 'blue' with 377; 'green' has the fewest with 217 associations.⁵⁰

3.3. In the post-Berlin-Kay's era, as far as original research carried out in Iran is concerned, a single essay written by an Iranian scholar (and mostly based on a sociolinguistic survey on colour perceptions by different strata of Meccan speakers of Arabic⁵¹) became available. Mehrdâd Mansuri, using ten Shirazi informants, assumes that the Fârsi system could be accommodated into the Basic Colour Theory sequence as a language having ten basic colour terms out of eleven, with no basic term for 'purple', but his set of labels is too extended and his methodology not clearly defined.⁵² 'Askari Kermani's article (2002) is limited to a survey of the research in the sector, and Iraj Afšâr (1999) shortly comments upon Mansuri's article.

A major step in the approach at colour description in the Iranian culture had originated – at the end of the 1970s – from a study partially based on Berlin-Kay's Theory, *Colors and culture change in Southwest Iran* by Erika Friedl,⁵³ dedicated to the colour perception in a Luri village and to the diverse chromatic salience of the surfaces (human and non-human) to which colours are associated in the village culture.

blanc, couleur des prêtres, par le rouge ou le bigarré, couleur des guerriers, et par le bleu (foncé), couleur des éleveurs-agriculteurs" (a formulation in any case too axiomatic as many other trifunctionalistic views).

⁴⁹ Osgood-May-Miron 1975.

⁵⁰ The recent criticism to Berlin and Kay's theory and to psycholinguistics have caused the disappearing of the emotional approach in the search for extralinguistic correlates to the colour terminology, as a quick look at the available bibliographies easily demonstrates; the current linguistic approach to colour could be described as a mix of etymological reconstructions, decipherment of symbols and anthropological descriptions. Many interesting symbolic and anthropologic remarks on colours in Persian literature are contained in Annemarie Schimmel's article *Color* in *Encyclopædia Iranica* (1993); on problems arising every time classical lexicography endeavours to compare and/or identify mineralogical colour labels and literary ones cf. e.g. Vesel 1985.

⁵¹ Al-Jehani 1990.

⁵² Mansuri 1996: 110-115 lists 118 colour labels mostly being artificial translations from English labels.

⁵³ Friedl 1979.

In particular, table no. 4 shows that the Luri dialect under examination possesses a five basic colour system, i.e. Stage IV in Berlin–Kay’s sequence, but while to describe colours in the natural environment, five abstract terms are used (‘black’, ‘white’, ‘red’, ‘green’ and ‘yellow’), and these five basic terms are also used in some other domain, e.g. in names for herbal medicines and spices, there exist in the language a series of separated chromatic subsets, because “a number of other terms are object-specific and do not readily transfer to other objects”.⁵⁴

term	quality	translation	examples
<i>souz</i>	green, blue	green	plants; rainbow is called ‘green-and-red’;
<i>sorkh</i>	red, pink	red	pink rose; red and pink blossoms
<i>zard</i>	yellow, ochre, orange	yellow	straw; yellow thistle; yellow rose; apricots; yolk
<i>sefid</i>	white, light	white	snow; milk; grapes; light skin; moon; honey
<i>se</i>	dark	black	blue rapes; night sky; tar; dark skin; soot;
<i>asamuni</i>	light blue	sky-ish	sky
<i>khaki</i>	brown, gray	earth-ish	soil; mud; ashes; rocks; mountain
<i>anabi</i>	dark red	pomegranate-ish	pomegranate
<i>naranji</i>	orange	orange-ish	orange and similar citrus fruits
<i>triaki</i>	brown	opium-ish	opium

Table 4. After Friedl 1979: 53, fig. 1.

For animals, the general terms for ‘black’, ‘white’, ‘green’, and ‘yellow’ are used, but most terms are object specific. “The term for the color of a white chicken is the abstract ‘white’, a Farsi word not used for any other animal. In fact, white chickens were introduced only a few years ago, no doubt the reason why their color quality does not have a Luri term of its own. The term ‘white’ was accepted with the chicken. A white donkey and cow are called by a Luri term that now means ‘green’ but formerly had the meaning of ‘young, fresh, light’. The term for a brown sheep formerly meant brownish-red, or blond. It is still used for brown hair but it is not readily transferred or used as an abstract color term for brown. For example, a sweater knit from *bur* wool is referred to as ‘black’, ‘purple’ or ‘opium-coloured’, rather than *bur*”.⁵⁵

In table no. 5 the abstract colour terms, i.e. the basic colour terms, are italicised.

animal	‘black’	‘white’	‘brown’	‘gray’
horse	<i>se</i>	sorkhan	kehar	ghazl
donkey	zarda	<i>souz</i>	—	gheza
sheep	kal	sisar	bur	kou
goat	<i>se</i> , kou	alus	sor, seri	tal
cow	<i>se</i>	<i>souz</i>	mur, <i>zard</i>	kou
chicken	<i>se</i> , ghaz	<i>sefid</i>	<i>zard</i>	kou

Table 5. After Friedl 1979: 53, fig. 2.

⁵⁴ Friedl 1979: 52.

⁵⁵ Friedl 1979: 52–53.

4. Friedl's remarks on the donkey's skin do contribute to explain the unbelievable amount of 'green donkeys', 'green sheep' and 'blue oxen' that should exist in many Iranian-speaking areas of south and south-western Iran if one would infer the colour of their skin from the modern (or better general usage) meaning of the chromatic labels applied to them.⁵⁶ "We tend not to notice that different hues of a similar brightness may give very similar sensations", wrote L. D. Lerner⁵⁷ more than fifty years ago trying to explain why modern English translations of *Beowulf* so often fail to yield the vivid atmosphere of the original Old English: what we learn now from anthropological linguistics is the existence of different chromatic subsets, each of them having its own semantic valencies depending on different domains but all interacting with the general chromatic lexicon. Since in this field the etymological process only accidentally hits the mark, one should accept that only partial subsets may be outlined for each different domain and historical document.

In this way we can explain why members of the etymological family of Prs. *bur*, a word specific to the chromatic lexicon generally translated with "blond" in modern bilingual dictionaries⁵⁸ – already met above in Friedl's treatment of the Luri colours of sheep – mean 'grey' said of animals in Luri, Madaglashti⁵⁹ and many Kurdish dialects,⁶⁰ 'yellow' or 'blond' in Ossetic,⁶¹ 'gold-yellow' in Âmorei, Mazandarani and at Jiroft (here particularly said of hair colour),⁶² while it designates *gusfand-e sefid mâyel be zard* (a 'white-yellow sheep') in Davani,⁶³ and 'to become *bur* of shame' means 'to become red-faced with shame' in Fârsi, Zarandi, Qamšei, Baxtiâri, Gilaki⁶⁴ and many other languages.

Modern discussions on the name of the beaver in connection with our colour label date back from the following remark in Bartholomae's article on *baßra-*: "ai. vgl. *babhráv-* Adj. 'rotbraun', auch Tiername".⁶⁵ From there, the connection was accepted by Pokorny,⁶⁶ and Bartholomae himself, going back twenty years later on the same word, connected to it Prs. *bur*, Bal. *bor*, Oss. *bur* / *bor*, Baxt. *būr*, Zaza *bur*,⁶⁷ and derived the whole set from Ir. **barwa-*, obviously an *ad hoc* reconstruction.⁶⁸ Discussing a passage of the *Bundahišn* (TD₂ 20.2-3)

⁵⁶ See e.g. Eastern Bal. *maī sawze xar* 'my grey donkey' (Gilbertson 1925: 297), Luri *sawz* 'green, white (animal)' (Amanolahi-Thackston 1986 s.v.), Baxtiâri *Čahârlang xar sowwza* 'white donkey' (Sarлак 2002 s.v.), Sangesari *sowz-e-xar* id. (Sotude 1986 s.v.), Daštastani *xer-e sowz* id. (Borâzjâni 2003 s.v.), Davâni *xar-e sôz* id. (Salâmi 2002 s.v.), Jiroft-Kahnuj *sowzâk* 'ox of green colour' (Nafas Dehqâni 1998 s.v.).

⁵⁷ Lerner 1951: 246.

⁵⁸ But e.g. also 'roux; fauve; marron clair, noisette (yeux)' in Lazard 1990 s.v.

⁵⁹ Unvala 1958: 14 (*būr*).

⁶⁰ Cf. Cabolov 2001: 206-207 (*bōr*) and Chyet 2003 s.v. (*bor*).

⁶¹ Abaev 1958 s.v. (*būr/bor*).

⁶² Âdelxâni 2000 s.v. (*bur*); Sotude 1962 s.v. (*bur*); Nafas Dehqâni 1998 s.v. (*bur*).

⁶³ Salâmi 2002 s.v. (*bu:r*).

⁶⁴ Babak 1996 s.v. (*bur*); Tâher 1965 s.v. (*bur*); Sarлак 2002 s.v. (*bur*); Farzpur Mâčiâni 1964 s.v.

⁶⁵ Bartholomae 1904: 925. On the symbolic implications of the name of the beaver cf. also Omidšalar 1984: 136 ff.; in what follows the main stress is not on the possibility to connect the etymological proposals **bawra-* and **barwa-*, on which much material is found in Mayrhofer 1996: 210 and Rastorgueva-Édel'man 2003: 151-154.

⁶⁶ Pokorny 1959: 136 (5. *bher-* 'glänzend, hellbraun').

⁶⁷ The connection of Prs. *bur* with Oss., Pšt. and Bal. analogous colour words already in Horn 1893: 53 no. 234.

⁶⁸ Bartholomae 1925: 5: "[...] das ich aus iran. **barwa-* (, idg. **beluo-* = lat. *fulvo-*s herleite, mit dem bei farbenbezeichnenden Adjektiven häufig auftretenden *uo-*-Suffix". Due to the unsatisfactory documentation of the time, Nlr. cognates quoted by Bartholomae have mostly inaccurate or inexact meanings.

where today usually an occurrence of ‘borax’⁶⁹ is found, Nyberg included in the first (German) edition of his *Handbook* an article “**bōrak* unsicherer Bed.”,⁷⁰ accepting **barūa*- as reconstructed by Bartholomae, and originating the Avestan – Middle Iranian – New Iranian set still current in the literature. In fact, as remarked by Dariush Borbor,⁷¹ there is no certainty at all that in Pahlavi *bōr* was ever used to denote any shade of ‘reddish-brown, bay (horse)’,⁷² ‘red’, or ‘rose’,⁷³ nor is it – as far as I know – ever used to indicate any horse coat. If one starts from the most attested meaning in modern Iranian languages, one will never reach the semantic field (real or metaphorical) of ‘grey/white/shining’, which is fully compatible with all the above, and with the fact⁷⁴ that a blue roan horse is perfectly perceptible in association with these colours. On the possible link of this etymological family with *al-burāq*, ‘the Prophet’s horse’, I would also recall similar remarks advanced more than thirty years ago by Angelo Piemontese in a noteworthy paper on this horse (1974): its colour is *bur-āq* (most probably an Iranian –*ak* derivative from **bur*) not because it is ‘white’ but because it is shining.

A similar case is *čarma* ‘white’: if one reflects on the quantities of colour names linking the skin of human and animals with shining colours, surely would agree that there is no reason to separate *čarma*, *čarme*, *čarmi* and cognates,⁷⁵ attested in a broad area in western Iran (Kurdish, Gurani, Awromani, Bajalani, Lori) as the primary designation of ‘white’⁷⁶ (both colour and coat of animal) and the like, from the pan-Iranian term for ‘skin’, Av. *čarəman-*.

The same intention to represent chromatic oscillation originating from the reflection of light from polished surfaces could be found in the usage of cognates of *raš*, which means ‘black’ in all Kurdish dialects,⁷⁷ a kind of ‘red’ (*sorx-e kamrang*) in Amorei,⁷⁸ a ‘mui-zard

⁶⁹ So e.g. Choksy 1986: 212 s.v. *bōrag*. On the origin of the borax name in Middle Persian cf. the following remark appearing at the end of Nyberg short treatment in his *Glossary*: “*bōrak*, NP *bōrah*, Syr. Lw. *bōrqā*, Arab *baurāq* ‘borax, nitre’, whose colour is silver-grey. The Arab translation of this name is *al-šabhā*, from *ašhab-* ‘grey, grizzled’ ” (Nyberg 1974: 48 s.v. *bor-*gil*).

⁷⁰ Nyberg 1931: 37.

⁷¹ In a forthcoming paper, kindly put at my disposal by the author; cf. also Borbor 2002: 191–192.

⁷² As MacKenzie 1986 s.v. translates, referring to a Prs. unquoted word which is assumed (according to MacKenzie’s symbolics) to have the same meaning.

⁷³ As is commonly assumed on the basis of *Borhān-e Qāte*, Dehxodā etc. As far as further Mlr. evidence is concerned, I do not think that the contexts of Khwar. *βwr* and Sogd. *βwr* (Mt Mugh) permit any useful comments. Sims-Williams 1992: 47 interprets Sogd. *βwr*, personal name repeatedly appearing in the Upper Indus inscriptions, as a colour label connected with MPrs. *bōr*, but doubts its ultimate etymological connections (a position accepted by Mayrhofer 1996: 210, where mention is also done of the possible connections between the name of the beaver and this Ir. root).

⁷⁴ Independently remarked by Porter 1992: 76 (“il n’est pas rare de voir dans les miniatures persanes des chevaux oranges, rouges, violets ou bleus, ce qui montre que leur couleur naturelle est moins importante que l’impressione general qui doit être transmise, par le jeu des couleurs et de la composition”) and by Dariush Borbor (“The resulting search in the miniatures confirmed our finding of the distinctive quality associated with the blue roan horses as in most cases blue roan horses were mounted by kings, princes, heroes or other distinguished characters”, cf. the unpublished essay quoted fn. 71 above, at p. 28 of the draft in my possession).

⁷⁵ Now mostly assembled in Rastorgueva–Edel’man 2003: 231–232.

⁷⁶ To this group one should also add Western Armenian *čermak* which is in complementary distribution with *spitak*, both meaning ‘white’; cf. Rocca 1988: 35–36.

⁷⁷ Cf. Cabolov 2001 and Chyet 2003 s.v.

⁷⁸ ‘Adelxāni 2000 s.v.

person' or 'zard hair' in Gurrkâni (Firuzâbâd),⁷⁹ a 'mottled cow' or the colour of a river in spate in Gilaki,⁸⁰ a Saka colour (*rrâša-*) which is translated as 'dark-coloured' by Bailey,⁸¹ and probably occurs in the keenly disputed⁸² name of Rostâm's horse, *Raxš*: while Monchi-Zadeh⁸³ seems to prefer the explanation of its colour coming from the inner tradition of the *Šâhnâme* (*hami raxš xânim o bur-e abraš ast*), it is again most probable⁸⁴ that an original stress on the shining appearance of the animal coat was subsequently mapped onto a noble, shining horse colour and then reinterpreted according to the modern meaning of the colour label.

Being demonstrated how difficult is to compare light impressions from animal coats with absolute colours as perceived in their focal contents, one should perhaps reconsider the proposed interpretations of horse coats allegedly appearing in bahuvr̥hic anthroponyms such as the OP hapax **zariaspa-* occurring as <m.za-ri-aš-ba> in the Elamite tablet Persepolis Fortifications 1719.⁸⁵ Philippe Swennen examined it together with its Old Indian assumed parallel *haryaśva-*, an Indra epithet having 27 Rigvedic occurrences, commonly translated 'aux chevaux jaunes',⁸⁶ assuming for both an actual reference to a yellowish⁸⁷ colour of the coat. Since Swennen shows convincingly⁸⁸ that in relation to colours of horses in the *Avesta* there are "deux niveaux de lecture", one symbolic ("consiste à qualifier la couleur des chevaux par référence à des étoiles"), the other realistic ("porteur d'une véritable définition chromatique"), one wonders if – in view of the well known hyppologic axiom that there is no 'white' horse in technical sense – some denotation of the old semantic of OIr. **zarda-* reserved to the animal skins only could refer to 'grey' appearance of horses conceived as 'swift' ('grey' = 'swift'), exactly as it does in various modern Iranian languages.⁸⁹

⁷⁹ Ja'fari Dehaqi 2002: 151.

⁸⁰ Pâyande 1987 s.v.

⁸¹ Bailey 1979 s.v., translating Tibetan colour labels pointing to 'pale blue' according to the author. In Eastern Iranian the lexical family could be represented by Khwar. *rxšyk* ('rotbraun' according to Benzing 1983 s.v., colour of a horse) and Wakhi *rakš* 'grey', probably both loanwords from Tajik (Morgenstierne 1938: 537, Steblin-Kamenskij 1999 s.v., cf. Darvaz Tajik *raxš* 'ryžij' Rozenfe'ld 1956 s.v.) as Sogd. *ryš* (name of the mythical *Raxš* but also 'bay horse' in *ryšw'spy*, cf. Benveniste 1940: 69 line 232) surely is.

⁸² At least since Nöldeke 1892: 141 fn. 2: "Rustam's Ross ist nicht schwarz, sondern eigentümlich scheckig".

⁸³ Cf. Monchi-Zadeh 1981: 58–59, where a projection of the (noble) black colour on the pawns in the game of chess is hinted on the basis of a passage from the *Nafā'is al-Funūn* (III 564); Panaino 1999: 77 fn. 92 points out the appreciation for the uniformity of the coat in OIr. tradition (but the 12,000 *asp* <ī> *tāzīg az ham-mōy* in *Wizārišn-ī čatrang*, 32 may as well indicate 12,000 horses all of the same colour, according to parade order).

⁸⁴ So Eilers 1976 p. 13 fn. 30a; on *abraš* cf. Piemontese 1974: 132–133 fn. 128. For different view cf. Shaki 1986: 260 who considers the traditional interpretations of *Raxš*'s coat in a realistic sense.

⁸⁵ Hallock 1969: 773.

⁸⁶ Swennen 2002: 165.

⁸⁷ Cf. 'mit falben Rossen' Mayrhofer 1976: 581, 'mit gelben Rossen' Mayrhofer 1996: 805, also as personal name.

⁸⁸ Swennen 1999–2000: 26–50 (= 2. *La couleur du cheval*).

⁸⁹ E.g. Lori *čaš-zard*, *tiya-zard* 'green/blue-eyed' (Amanolahi–Thackston 1986 s.v.), Davani *zarda* 'black donkey' (Salāmi 2002 s.v.) etc.

5. I would now briefly comment upon an issue in which the focal point of a chromatic label proved crucial in the interpretation of a popular belief, just to give an idea of why one should prefer what I would call a ‘mixed’ approach to colour terminology: it is exactly in this way that cultural categories, etymological know-how and anthropological data (reconsidered from a cognitive inter-linguistic point of view) can be balanced in a unitary perspective.

Our specimen comes from the folklore of an extended area from Anatolia to Mongolia.⁹⁰ In this *continuum* anthropologists and folklorists have noticed an imaginary being, commonly represented as an old woman called *Âl* or *Albasti* by the villagers. According to the Italian turcologist Ugo Marazzi,⁹¹ the original area of the demon should be Southern Siberia. This Mongol/Turkic *Albasti*, having in common with its Turkish and Iranian counterparts (*Âl*) “some traits referring to birth and fecundity”, should be considered – according to Marazzi – as a separate entity with an original meaning in the field of ‘extraordinary, terrible, magic’.

This explanation is alternative to that independently proposed by Mixail Stepanovič Andreev and Emile Benveniste⁹²; according to Benveniste, a ‘primeval element’ of Indo-Iranian origin – pointing both to ‘red’ and ‘puerperal fevers’ – coming from some Central Asian Iranian language would have entered Central Asian Turkic becoming *Albasti*.

One of the elements appearing already in the early reports on the folklore of the *Âl* is the contextual presence of elements linked to a colour (mostly, but not always, red) and elements linked to birth difficulties.

In the Pamir *Albasti* is represented as an old woman with blondish/black hair; in the Yaghnobi valley as a tall woman with blondish hair; in the Shughnan *Almaste* is a witch with multicoloured hair and blazing eyes; in the Dardic region *Halmasti* is a dark-red dog; among the Kazakh and Kirghiz there is a ‘yellow *albarsti*’ and a ‘black *albarsti*’ imagined as a yellow dog (or goat); in the Tianshan *Albarsty* appears both as red-blondish girl and as a dog/goat/sheep; in the Tajik-speaking area the *Albasti* is a lanky woman with reddish hair; among the Qača a female spirit dressed in yellow causes sharp pains if not appeased with offerings.

If we put together the main features of the *Albasti*-set with those of the Turkic-Iranian *Âl*-set, the links with the red extremity of the chromatic spectrum becomes evident. An old collection of Iranian folk traditions describes the *Âl* as an entity with red hair; for this reason the bed of women in childbirth should not contain any references to red colours. Henry Massé reports on an encounter of a hunter and an old woman dressed in red, called *Âl*, fleeing with a liver freshly stolen to a woman in childbirth. The *Âl* runs away if shown iron tools and black coal; in Mâzandarân the mother is protected placing a piece of coal next to her bed, and in Western Iran a yellow horse is led around her house in order to repel the *Âl*’s harm. In Khorasân the *Âl* is described as a female demon with a red face and a nose of clay. Wilhelm Eilers describes the Khunsar *Âl* as a demon of coal-red colour representing the personification of puerperal fever. Among the Qašqâi of Fârs the *Âl* is of scarlet colour or with golden hair (but the spell to repel it calls the *Âl* ‘the black’). Her

⁹⁰ The following report on the folklore of the *Âl* is based on Rossi 2003, which contains full references to authors and languages mentioned in this paragraph in an abbreviated form.

⁹¹ Marazzi 1987.

⁹² Cf. Andreev 1970; Benveniste 1960.

dressess are red also in Turkish-speaking Anatolia, and one protect oneself hanging to one's own clothes golden coins with reddish glint. Among the chromatic references given by Massé one notices the hanging to the doors of an animal heart or liver and the prohibition to introduce anything of red colour in the puerperal room. In Šîrâz the *Âl* is described as white, with white eyebrows; also Edward G. Browne observed that *Âl* has blondish hair, while the hair are yellow in Eilers' report, golden in Tajikistan, or in free variation 'red/white' according to other scholars. The shining radiance (i.e. 'white', 'yellow' or 'red') whereby one may oppose the *Âl* is represented by the lights or fires that should burn during the night, as was reported for the Baloč of Turkmenistan (sometimes also in Iran and Turkey). To the black colour may be referred the usage to put a black woollen rope around the mother's bed or to place twelve blackened cotton wicks around the room; in Lorestân the rope is black and white, but the black colour reappears in the usage to trace a black line around the bed and in the Khorasâni tradition of dying the newborn's face with black (because they believe that the *Âl* fears the black colour of coal).

The chromatic correlates of the *Âl* would remain rather inexplicable if in parallel with ethnographic considerations we could not resort to linguistic (and ethnolinguistic) ones. While the etymologies advanced by Benveniste, Doerfer⁹³ and Eilers point out that in Turkic and in Iranian a root **al-* (referring both to 'red' and 'flames') should have existed, they leave open the question of the direction of a possible borrowing (Iranian-Turkic or Turkic-Iranian). However, one should also take into account a series of chromatic references present in Iranian languages for words of this lexical family, coinciding with the colours noticed in the *Âl* folklore, the symbolic values which may be attributed to them, and the feelings commonly linked to the perception of these colours in everyday's experience of the speakers of these Iranian languages.

It is just in the symbolic features of the *Âl* that one should look for an explanation of its chromatic correlates. According to the oldest explanation in Persian, the *Âl* is a fire-red demon hunting for the mother red liver.⁹⁴ The red element attracts and repels at the same time: the *Âl* is attracted by the bowels, therefore by the 'red' colour (but the bowels may also be interpreted as 'black' in many Iranian languages) and is drawn back by fires, therefore the red colour again (but fire may also be interpreted as 'white' throughout Iranian); we observe here the primeval principle according to which *similia similibus curantur*. As regards a possible rationalisation process linking puerperal fever to the demon *Âl*, one should think of the possibility that the 'chromatic' feature traditionally associated to the *Âl* be the 'prototypical' characteristics of the human face to appear as 'white and red', i.e. to present a sort of dichromatism, a feature striking under the effect of fever which may induce the perception of the human face as 'variegated', in analogy with coats of horses and other animals (this could explain the persistent meaning of 'variegated' linked to the colour label *âl* both in Turkish and in Iranian).

If we should take into consideration only the (perceptive) psycholinguistic correlates of this phenomenon, contradictory data would appear (according to cultural stereotypes present in the different local cultures): some informants have emphasised that 'yellow' is the colour of illness, but others have stressed the positive character of the 'blond' and of the albinism; others have simply considered terrific the *Âl*'s 'black' or 'red' face (or only her

⁹³ Doerfer 1965: 94-97 (nos. 517-18), 102 (no. 520), 109f. (no. 524); Doerfer 1975: 413-415 (*Nachträge*).

⁹⁴ Šāmlū-Russel 1985: 741.

‘red hair’), others have emphasised the positive effects of the ‘external red’ as opposed to the ‘inner black-red’ of the bowels, and so on. Therefore none of the chromatic associations may represent alone the solution to the interrogatives contained in the ethnographic survey, and an etymological approach developed within each single linguistic family may lead to lose sight of the cross-cultural (and therefore cross-linguistic) character of the whole set of phenomena, into which perception, public imaginary and history of language intermingle.

6. If we apply the same research methodology to a somewhat different sector, that of the stones mentioned in lapidaries, where particular colours are associated with future events, we will realise that further chromatic factors are involved, leading to different sub-sectors of the colour lexica. With the lapidaries, we are at the watershed between the colour perception of human features and that of non-human surfaces, and it is well known that the two domains have different terminologies especially as regards saturation and brightness of colour: the basic colour of a gem is the effect of its mineralogical composition, its “brilliance” is the reflection of external light from its polished facets, its “fire” or “water”⁹⁵ (prismatic rainbow glitter) is proportional to its refractive index. From time immemorial the gems are perceived – by magic convention – as if they were provided with a particular activation power, precisely their “fire” or “water”. In one of the two lapidary traditions which reached us in Pahlavi and Sogdian, the one in Sogdian on the *pothi* leaves from the Collection Pelliot, after the description of each stone is explicitly stated that “when one polishes⁹⁶ it, a X water comes out” (č’n’kw ’nsy’y rtyyw X β’m’k ’’ph nyž’y). The same word ‘water’ (Runic Turkish *sub*) is used in a Turkish fragment of similar content,⁹⁷ and the same polishing procedure is hinted at by a Middle Persian lapidary contained in the *Pahlavi Rivāyat* accompanying the *Dādestān ī dēnīg*,⁹⁸ with the expression *kē-š sāyišn* X [=colour name] (“whose gloss is X”) recurring periodically after the colour of the gem treated in each paragraph. This lapidary account occurs only in the *Dādestān ī dēnīg*, which postdates the Sasanian period by several centuries: it defines the gem-stones by colour, refers periodically to their lustre, and lists the magical functions for each; it is possible that the lapidary text preserves genuine Sasanian attitudes, even if in a very confused form.⁹⁹

Notwithstanding Williams’ explanation of the cyclical structure of the passage, and his reordering of the seven colours appearing in it (i.e. green (*sabz*), black (*syāh*), yellow (*zard*), red (*suxr*), dark blue (*xāšēn*), sky-coloured (*asmāngōn*) and that of the polished stone,¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Eilers 1964: 230: “Zufälliger Natur ist der Zusammenfall von arisch *ā’bhā-* »Glanz« und *āp-* »Wasser« in np. *āb*, doch hat er wohl den Begriffsumfang von arab. *mā’* 1. »Wasser«, 2. »Glanz« mit beeinflusst [...] Daher hat der Diamant auch bei uns statt des sonst »Feuer« genannten Glanzes, wie die Fachleuten sich ausdrücken: »Wasser«.”

⁹⁶ Benveniste 1940: 64 translates “quand’on la presse, il en sort une ‘eau’”, but it is clear from the comparison with the *Pahlavi Rivāyat* accompanying the *Dādestān ī dēnīg* that the verbal root in question is *sāy-* ‘to rub, polish’.

⁹⁷ Thomsen 1910: 305.

⁹⁸ Chapter 64; Menasce 1942-1945 is the first modern treatment after Dhabhar’s edition of the *Pahlavi Rivāyat* accompanying the *Dādestān ī dēnīg*.

⁹⁹ Brunner 1978: 46.

¹⁰⁰ A sequence in any case much more acceptable than Menasce’s six colour one: ‘brillante’ (**spēz*), ‘noire’ (*syā*), ‘jaune’ (*zard*), ‘rouge’ (*suxr*), ‘verdâtre’ (*xāšēn*), ‘bleu-ciel’ (*asmān-gōn*). No single element in this passage may confirm or disprove any connection with the clear astrological significance of the seven colours in Nezāmi’s *Haft peikar* (on whose astral magic background cf. Vesel 1995).

which varies each time and always occurs second in the cycle among the other stones), many magic characteristics of the stones remains unexplained, particularly the reason why different potencies are attributed to different stones. In particular, only guesses may be formulated about possible correlations between e.g. iconographical engraved motifs and the stone colours, and about astrological sympathies and macrocosm-microcosm correspondences.¹⁰¹ In any case, the Iranian and Old Turkic lapidaries seem to agree – although their chromatic terminology may belong to languages of different families, ranging from Old Turkic to Pahlavi and Sogdian – in the positive value attributed to black stones, while the vital energy of red stones is often considered as a negative energy. It may not be a chance that in all these regions ‘black’ is the colour of carnality, not the colour of mourning; the countless black deities of the antiquity emphasise their own worldly carnality, similarly black is used for the plaits of the beloved in the Persian mystical poetry, while the human world is a pretty woman hiding her black legs to fascinate men. But one should be prudent: in the lapidaries, as in all the other contexts where the magic approach predominates, we can not always understand if some kind of analogical reasoning is involved.

7. A scheme of interpretation interlinking precious stones and their gloss, the brightness of their colours, and shining colours as symbol of majesty could perhaps explain the use of colour in the royal Achaemenid architecture. While commenting on the precious stones mentioned in Darius’ inscription DSf (the so called *Magna Charta* from Susa), Herzfeld noticed¹⁰² that an insertion of blue stone in the Persepolis reliefs had been planned for beard and hair of the human figures. Many pieces of inlaid blue beards (both lapislazuli and blue composition) were subsequently found in the so-called Harem, in the so-called Frataḏāra Temple and in various places on the Terrace, while abundant traces of a blue pigment were found on the hair and beard of a Persian soldier at the bottom to the right of the façade of the Northern Tomb at Kuh-e Rahmat. No colours have been found on any of the naked parts of the relief figures at Persepolis.¹⁰³

Is the usage of blue in connection with some particular symbolism which we can no more understand, to be further connected with the usage of blue in the cuneiform characters¹⁰⁴ of the inscriptions in the tomb of Darius at Naqš-e Rostām¹⁰⁵ ?

Or does the shining blue of the mentioned inserts only underline some parts of the royal entourage’s faces which could be considered as particularly shining, in accordance with

¹⁰¹ Brunner 1978: 46. According to Gyselen 1995: 65, seal producers appears as rather indifferent to the material used for Sasanian magic seals.

¹⁰² Herzfeld 1931: 67 (“der Lapislazuli in Persepolis für Bart und Haar der Bildwerke im t a č a r a gebraucht war”).

¹⁰³ Tilia 1978: 39-40 and fn. 3 on p. 39 (with literature); cf. also Ambers-Simpson 2005 (with literature).

¹⁰⁴ Schmidt 1970: 99: “Traces of blue pigment discovered by Boris Dubensky in some signs of the DNa inscription behind the king’s figure are sufficient proof that all characters of at least the Old Persian and Elamite versions of this inscription were painted blue, and we see no reason to doubt that all inscriptions on the tomb were treated in the same manner”.

¹⁰⁵ As possibly contrasted with traces of red (?) colour pigments most recently discovered by our Iranian colleagues on the inscription A?Pb on tomb V of Persepolis, as kindly reported to me during a visit to Persepolis (2003) by Hassan Rahsaz [the label ‘A?’ has been adopted here for the southern tomb in view of the not fully convincing arguments in favour of the attribution of this inscription to either Artaxerxes II (dynastic, cf. Schmidt 1970: 99) or Artaxerxes III (palaeographical, cf. Schmitt 2000: 119)].

what was said above concerning *bur* and other blue/white shining appearances? If so, one would be tempted to propose a similar interpretation for the epithet *spiti-dōiθra-* (ambiguously transcribed by the Pahlavi commentators as *spēd-dōysar*¹⁰⁶), applied to the young man being the personification of Tištrya in the *Tištār Yašt* and of Vərəθrayna in the *Bahrām Yašt*, also used to describe the aspect of Gayōmard in the 17th chapter of the *Bundahišn*.

And since we also have information of some red pigment on the eyeballs and in the corners of the eyes of the standing Persian and Median guards on the façades of the northern stairway in front of the Council Hall,¹⁰⁷ why not extend our reasoning to try to explain the Armenian tradition – evidently derived from an Iranian – to represent the victorious hero with white or hell eyes and white or hell hair¹⁰⁸?

Taken in their modern meaning, these chromatic references would be incomprehensible: why to have white eyes or blue eyes should be a sign of majesty, if both things are considered as regrettable in the traditional *Weltanschauung* embodied in the linguistic usages of a quantity of modern Iranian languages and dialects? But if we take into consideration the brightness of colour, and not its saturation, the solution stares us in the face.

The argument could go on with further examples, but what I would like to emphasise here is that the research on the Iranian colour terminology (started at the Department of Asian Studies of *L'Orientale* within the frame of a Project on the *Ethnolinguistics of the Iranian speaking regions* many years ago¹⁰⁹) has shown that there is a new open domain in the Iranian philology where archaeologists, anthropologists and philologists could and should collaborate, with mutual advantages, in the near future.¹¹⁰

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¹⁰⁶ "a mechanical transcription of Av. *dōiθra-*" Zaehner 1955: 325 (ad line 9), to be read *spēd-dōysar* (not *dōys^ar* as MacKenzie 1986: 27, or *dōisr* as Zaehner 1955: 322 line 9).

¹⁰⁷ Tilia 1978: 66-68, but also traces of **blue** pigment in the eye of the left guard to the right of the façade of the southern Artaxerxes Tomb (ibid. p. 43 fig. 2 letter c). On blue and red in the prehistoric Near East cf. Sagona 1996: 151-155.

¹⁰⁸ Ajello 1980: 79-81 (with the papers by Gianroberto Scarcia quoted there). Ajello remarked the similarity between the Armenian 'young victorious hero' and the Iranian figures mentioned in the *Tištār Yašt*, in the *Bahrām Yašt* and in the *Bundahišn*.

¹⁰⁹ Funded by the Italian Ministry of University in the 1990s (COFIN national project 9710425417).

¹¹⁰ Suggestions on colour and/or its role in the Iranian culture were made on different occasions to the author from Giorgio Banti, Paolo Bensi, Michele Bernardini, David Buyaner, Alfredo Cadonna, Maria Vittoria Fontana, Alessandro Grossato, Maria Grossmann, Mauro Maggi, Giacomella Orofino, Antonio Panaino, Hassan Rahsaz, Shahrokh Razmjou, Rüdiger Schmitt, Martin Schwartz, Shaul Shaked, Riccardo Zipoli and the late Giorgio R. Cardona, Aleksandr L. Grjunberg, Vitalij M. Gusalov. To all of them the author is deeply grateful.

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